

## 25 Flesh

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Fugitivity is seeing around corners, stockpiling in crevices, knowing the “unrules,” being unruly, because the rules are never enough, and not even close.

—Macharia 2013

I illustrate what becomes possible when blackness wonders and wanders in the world, heeding the ethical mandate to challenge our thinking, to release the imagination, and to welcome the end of the world as we know it, that is, decolonization, which is the only proper name for justice.

—Silva 2018

### **Knowing Nearby**

As algorithmic models increasingly assist, judge, and manage human life, a growing amount of scrutiny, criticism, and backlash has ensued, calling into question the inequality of such powerful applications and demanding a renewed focus on bias, ethics, and governmental regulation (Eubanks 2017; Noble 2018; O’Neil 2016). Yet what remains unchallenged is the hierarchy of power and authority cohered through claims of rationality and universality from which data-based metrics speak, foreclosing the possibility for what feminist theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha calls “speaking nearby.” Reflecting on her practice as a filmmaker to deemphasize the objectifying power of the lens to reduce subjects to axiomatic objects, Minh-ha states: “I wish not to speak about, only to speak nearby” (Chen 1992, 87).

This chapter attempts to speak nearby contemporary discussions in critical data studies, showing what Black feminist scholarship has to offer questions of ethics, bias, and data justice. In particular, I argue that appeals to ethics- and rights-based discourses misread the harm caused by algorithmic violence, providing ill-fitting avenues for reproach. Moreover, I question gestures toward repairing the tools of analysis, metrics, and quantification to redress the

very violences they engender without challenging their underpinning logics, asking: What are the limits to the visions of justice these approaches suggest?

Toward that end, I offer a reading of *flesh* as a critical site that interrupts the efficient causality of risk modeling by creating confrontations between the residual violences of racialization and the uncertainty of knowability. This requires speculation to operate in excesses of our current tools, past their delimiting logics. I argue for flesh as a particular figuring of Blackness that reveals its transformative potential to engage ways of knowing that refuse to be parsed: neither self-contained nor singular but intertwined, affective, irresolute, and extimate in their connections.

### Residual Causality

Mapping the scaffolding of scientific reason's architecture, Denise da Silva argues that it operates by what she terms *efficient causality*, which "comprehends the event in explanations that always already resolve its transformative potential back into objectivity, into facts" (Silva 2013, 43–44). Silva is drawing our attention to the ways by which the "methods (calculation/measurement, classification, and interpretation) that have characterized modern knowledge" reduce the event as always being resolved because of its need to be accounted for through discrete classification and rationalization.

This relationship between efficient causality and transformative potential situates, defines, and fixes understandings of Blackness to the body. Through the residual taxonomies of classification held over from the natural sciences, race is commonly understood to reside on the surface of the body, as a set of phenotypic descriptors grouped and used as a text upon which to read hierarchically arranged qualifications. Race, and Blackness in particular, becomes epidermalized, confined to the skin: immutable, axiomatic, and clear. This spurious construction of race is undergirded by the obsessive measurement of bodily difference: curvature of brow; protrusion of lips; nasal capacity; skull size, density, and shape; texture of hair; contours of arms, legs, buttocks, phallus, labia, pubis. The body of the racialized subject has always been a quantified construction divorced from the self, atomized and disciplined into numerical metrics (Fausto-Sterling 1995; Terry and Urla 1995). This measurability in turn justifies and constitutes the categories of race, gender, and sexuality, which then come to define the body as aberrant while inscribing man (read as white, straight, cis male) as the universal subject (Hong and Ferguson 2011; Roberts 2012; Silva 2018; Wynter 2003). Elaborating on this, Dorothy Roberts writes: "Only a decade ago, the biological concept of race seemed finally to have met its end. The Genome Project, which mapped the entire human genetic code, proved that race could not be identified in our genes. . . . Contrary to popular misconception, we are not naturally divided into genetically identifiable racial groups.

Biologically, there is one human race. Race applied to human beings is a political division: it is a system of governing people that classifies them into a social hierarchy based on invented biological demarcations" (Roberts 2012, x). Roberts points to the ways by which the category of Blackness is constructed through an appeal to scientific reason's use of metrics and claims to universalism. However, the category of Blackness is the product of efficient causality that resolves Blackness into measurements taken from the body. This lacuna between Blackness and the category of Blackness marks the ways theorist Hortense Spillers differentiates between "real objects" and "objects of knowledge."

For Spillers, Black studies produces a particular mode of scholarship, deftly distinguishing "the real object"—that which is naturalized—from "objects of knowledge," which are formed through the complex interplay among institutions, politics, violence, discourses, practices, and economics, to name but a few (Spillers 1994, 65). In this postulation, Black people are not the real objects of Black studies; rather, Blackness as the outcome of racialization becomes an object of knowledge. To misread Black people as the real objects of Black studies naturalizes race as a modality of either biology or culture. Instead, for Spillers, "blackness is a symbolic program of philosophical 'disobedience' (a systematic skepticism and refusal) that would make the former available to anyone, or more pointedly, any posture, that was willing to take on the formidable task of thinking as a willful act of imagination and invention" (Spillers 2003, 5).

The work of Spillers demands that representations of Blackness not be assumed as real objects evaluated by their comporting to imagined standards of measure and pushes us instead to investigate: What are the forces that shape and determine Blackness, and why is such a representation needed in the first place? Put simply, what is the work that Blackness, and, by extension, race, does (Chun 2009)?

Denise da Silva takes up this question, arguing that the category of Blackness defined by the measurable differentiation of bodies, geographies, and cultures is a sociological index that naturalizes racial animosity as a phenomenon of group belonging and difference. In this process the problem of racial subjugation is relegated to the domain of ethics and moral inferiority. This shift performs two crucial misdirections.

First, it completely elides the centrality of racial subjugation as a systemic component of the building of Europe as a colonial power. It is important here to contextualize *systemic* not solely as a determinant of scale but as an integrated social, philosophical, economic, and juridical architecture. It is through such an architecture that the category of Blackness is created and does the productive work of selecting, identifying, and organizing bodies and lands as sites of extraction. Moreover, via the foundational texts of continental philosophy, these spaces are also differentiated as sites of ethical and moral absence, meaning that the violence of expropriation was not only justified but ethical under the juridical architecture of colonial

Europe (Silva 2007). Such a lens allows us to decouple ethics and morality as stable arbiters of social beneficence.

Second, redressing the violences of this period through an ethical register situates the fault to be corrected at the site of the social, materialized through attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and bias. While the social can be argued to be individual or collective (held by individuals or scaled within the practices of institutions and nation-states), this distinction still continues to omit the continued economic-juridical expropriation of total value from captured bodies and lands upon which global capitalism depends. Due to this misdirection, calls for reform through ethics- and rights-based discourses are inadequate as critical lenses for undoing the very architecture that requires uneven dispossession. Group-differentiated interlocking oppression reflected, automated, and rationalized through the efficiency of causality means that calls for ethics and morality training are woefully inapplicable, as the problem is not merely a moral failing but also the economic structuring of modernity: decolonization must be the goal to ensure the rightful name of justice. Decolonization, in the Silvan sense, requires “the setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands . . . that is the unknowing and undoing of the World that reaches its core” (Silva 2014, 85). The promise of decolonization is not an ethical reparative act to right past wrongs; it is a fundamental call to ways of unknowing that bring about the end of the world (as we know it) ordered by rationalized extraction and property relations. The redressing of violence, then, must include acts of refusal, imagination, and invention.

### **Transformative Interpretation**

To better illustrate this point with relation to contemporary discussions of bias and risk modeling, I want to turn to *ProPublica's* investigative reporting in its series *Machine Bias*. This series proved to be a seminal, dutiful piece of investigative reporting on bias in risk-assessment algorithms and is deservedly cherished within critical data studies. Throughout the series, researchers found grave racial imbalances in the statistical models used to predict future criminality and allocate criminal sentences. On average, scores of risk are skewed higher for Black defendants than for white defendants. This is due to the use of proxy indicators such as credit score, income, residential zip code, level of education, and other factors that can yield compounded risk and longer sentences for Black defendants, regardless of whether they are first-time or repeat offenders (Angwin et al. 2016). The logic of the model assumes these indicators as facts of efficient causality rather than possible metrics for better understanding the effects of long-standing systemic racism as it permeates into uneven life

chances reflected by credit score, income, and others. From this causal position, the model is only capable of employing a logic of resolving what is, rather than asking how things come to be or are in a state of becoming. It reads these disparities as determinants of future criminality squared at the individual. This forecloses the transformative potential to read the differences in credit score, income, residential zip code, and level of education as indicative of systemic racialization and is then incapable of understanding how racism itself colors the data. This foreclosure is due to the primacy given to data as a condition for certainty within modern thought. This forces us to misunderstand the data as the objects of critique upon which to intervene, which obscures the histories of total expropriation—a relationship of economic, social, psychological, cultural, and ontological extraction. When we misunderstand the data as problematic, the larger goal of decolonization (meaning the complete redress and return of value from expropriation) remains unimaginable and out of view. To be clear, white cisheteropatriarchy is not a deviant bug of modernity whereby individual bias or racial vitriol is the culprit that needs to be fixed. It is the very conceptual framework for the nation, for justified expropriation, and for continued infringement on the lives and lands of those dispossessed.

### Figuring the Flesh

The transformative potential of Blackness freed from the category of Blackness finds form in the flesh. Blackness as an object of knowledge because of, rather than in spite of, its unasimilability allows for the radical potential of a different set of epistemological practices. The promise of such practices is to allow the space for irresolution that efficient claims deny, giving form to Minh-ha's call to know by speaking nearby. In an interview with Nancy N. Chen for the *Visual Anthropology Review*, Minh-ha elaborates further: "In other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition" (Chen 1992, 87). The episteme of Minh-ha's practice is capacious, leaving open the unresolved space of coming to know something that is relational: taking into consideration the specific context of the speaker, the place from which they speak, the closeness they share, and the mode through which that speaking happens. To know in this context is not a territorial claim to be made, enclosed, and defended but an endured practice of proximity. To speak nearby is a gesture of knowing that requires engagement, perforating the hermetic encapsulation of totality.

In Hortense Spillers's seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she details the ways that the bodies of captured Black slaves were dismembered from their corporeal agency and relegated to what she calls the flesh: "But I would make a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (Spillers 1987, 67). Here Spillers notes the ways that enslaved Black people fell out of a property relationship to themselves, losing agency over the body as the preliminary site of ownership. This transition from body to flesh was a necessary precondition for the opaque process of fungibility by which no-longer-embodied, enslaved Black people became a raw material in order for others to expropriate their total value. Blackness centered in the flesh is an alluvial position of indeterminacy denied the corporeal agency needed to inscribe a subject. Alexander Weheliye notes this radical potential within the position of the flesh. He writes: "Conceptualized in this way, the flesh thus operates as a vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternate ways of being. . . . Not an aberration, yet excluded, not at the center of being but nevertheless constitutive of it" (Weheliye 2014, 44).

The indeterminacy of the flesh marks a rupture in the certainty that modern forms of thinking command. It is important here to make a distinction between uncertainty and unknowability. Theodora Dryer's work "Algorithms under the Reign of Probability" is helpful in defining uncertainty within statistical algorithmic models. Dryer (2018) defines uncertainty as "probability described likelihoods of propositions and events, usually expressed as a percentage, where perfect certainty is 1 and uncertainty is  $< 1$ " (93). She goes on to position uncertainty as a tactic to quell public anxiety over error within statistical models by devising a way to contain and account for the stochastic and unknown. On this point she writes: "Anxious about a loss of public confidence in data-driven institutions, technocrats sought to command error in statistical estimation. . . . New probability tools were designed to delimit uncertainty in statistical research. These were based in translating common statistical research concepts—vagueness, error, and randomization—into the language of axiomatic probability theory" (94). In this passage Dryer is marking the translation of vagueness, error, and randomization—in short, uncertainty—into certainty. Indications such as error or vagueness are naturally occurring aspects of the model, rather than aberrations that require sequestration. This translation removes the potential promise that uncertainty can hold in reframing the inner workings of the algorithmic model. Dryer argues that uncertainty is in fact a site for critical inquiry to intervene within algorithmic models. Yet there is an unresolved tension between the critical promise of uncertainty and the ways in which it is routinely constituted

as “objectivity, truth, and certainty for political and economic interest” (95). If uncertainty is the ability for the unknown to be accounted for by comporting to containment under the logics of algorithmic models, then what can unknowability offer instead? Making connections between uncertainty and Black studies, Treva Ellison (2016) argues: “Black scholars have theorized the uncertainty of blackness as a foundational component of modern systems of representation and spatial production” (337).

Ellison’s work marks a return to the ways that Blackness read as captive flesh is understood as a comparative space of ethical absence otherwise wholly unknown as a subject within itself. This is where Weheliye’s theorizing of the flesh as an inhabitable space unaccounted for within Western modernity upholds the promise of uncertainty through the unknown. Unknowability born from the figure of the flesh opens the space for ways of understanding the world that are otherwise discounted because of their inability to be neatly measured and accounted for. It is the place in which irresolution is allowed to reside. It is the voluminous space in which fullness returns to be figured.

As the scale of critique and intervention into algorithmic violence grows in meaningful and productive ways toward systemic societal shift (Dave 2019; Hoffmann 2019), flesh becomes an essential outlier from which to assess the limitations of sociotechnical fixes. Flesh is the poignant, unavoidable signifier and text upon which to read the history and reality of total expropriation of value from bodies and land. Simultaneously, its failure to comport to neat encapsulation as a cohered subject grants flesh a privileged relationship to unknowability. This relationship releases the uncertainty of Blackness as an imaginative guide for pursuing the unfinished work of decolonization found in the practices, rituals, and knowledges of survival born from the flesh. This establishes the boundaries from which productive reason and certainty are able to speak, no longer with singular authority but from a proximal place; not speaking about but nearby, bringing about the end of the world as we know it to ensure survival beyond it.

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